

CHAPTER 9. REDESIGNING AN UNPOPULAR UNIVERSITY COURSE: WAYS TO PROMOTE STUDENTS' MOTIVATION AND QUALITY OF LEARNING

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Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to share my experience from teaching a course redesigned to enhance students' motivation to study personnel psychology. In the past students had shown little affinity toward this course, finding personnel psychology distant from their preferred career choices. Thus, the course was revised in order to help even those students who are not genuinely interested in personnel psychology to acquire the essential concepts of this subfield and to learn to apply these properly. There were five teachers¹ involved in teaching the course and our main effort was directed towards changing students' attitudes: we wanted the course to be perceived as interesting and useful for all students regardless of their future career plans.

Therefore, we aligned the course objectives, learning activities, and assessment methods more closely. This included changing the teaching and learning methods to allow for the developing of student competences more effectively and in line with the demands of the contemporary labour market. We introduced exercises to develop students' critical thinking, problem solving, and collaborative skills. We also increased the demand for students' pre-class preparation by assigning them readings and group work outside of the classroom. The effects of the innovation were assessed by my observation of students' behaviour during classes, analysis of the final marks, and via a student feedback survey. The innovation enhanced students' motivation to study the course, and thereby their quality of learning. The chapter concludes with discussing the limitations of the presented approach and suggests further course enhancements.

Teaching challenge, pedagogic concepts applied and expected outcomes of the innovation

Personnel Psychology is a mandatory, innovated course, and is offered to sixty psychology students in the third year of their Bachelor studies at Masaryk University. The purpose is to introduce students to the main concepts and theories within the field of personnel psychology and to develop students' higher order thinking skills such as the ability to integrate different types of information and arguments. The course is composed of six lectures and six seminars during

¹ Special thanks to my colleagues Martin Vaculík, Jakub Procházka, Marcela Leugnerová and Kateřina Hašková for all the effort they invested to redesign and deliver this course.

the semester's twelve weeks. The classes are delivered by a mixture of experienced teachers and doctoral students

Before the innovation, students were expected to attend lectures in order to familiarize themselves with the main concepts and theories, then deepen their knowledge through self-study. The general assessment method was a test at the end of the semester that included both open-ended and closed-ended questions. However, as lectures were not mandatory, a number of students did not attend these or failed to pay attention. Also, students typically read the assigned literature superficially and memorised the material for the exam, but they could not apply their knowledge and forgot it quickly.

Thinking about the reasons why students underperformed in this course, we identified students' low intrinsic motivation to study personnel psychology as the main barrier to student learning. Students did not consider the subject useful because most of them intended to find jobs in counselling or healthcare. However, as a survey among the earlier programme graduates uncovered (Cígler and Horská 2015), most psychology students did eventually become personnel psychologists.

As we aimed at increasing the quality of student learning by boosting their motivation to learn and increasing their active participation, we made a series of changes to the course. Firstly, constructive alignment was applied to increase student motivation and engagement. This principle suggests that all components in the teaching system (i.e. the curriculum, the intended outcomes, the teaching methods, and the assessment tasks) are to be aligned with each other (Biggs 2003). Following this principle, at the beginning of the semester, students received a course syllabus which was significantly more detailed than before and included the description of the course assignments. During the first seminar, my colleague went through the syllabus with students to ensure they understood what they were expected to learn (in terms of content), why (rationale and philosophy), how (process), when (structure), and how they were to demonstrate the outcomes of their learning (assessment). At the beginning of each class, the teacher clearly specified the session's goals and concluded with a summary of what students learned and how they could use it. The class objectives were chosen to be relevant not only for future personnel psychologists, but also for psychologists working in other domains.

Second, new learning activities were introduced in order to help students to develop higher-level thinking based upon Bloom's taxonomy (for details see Krathwohl 2002). During lectures and seminars, students were invited not only to summarise what they had learned from the literature and classes, but also to understand, apply, analyse and evaluate the information. Devoting extended class time to these activities became possible as a result of the use of the flipped classroom approach (Bishop and Verleger 2013). Students were introduced to the learning material before seminars, which reduced time necessary for in-class lecturing and allowed for this time to be used for active learning exercises such as discussions with peers, role play, and problem-solving facilitated by teachers.

Third, innovating the learning activities required changing the assessment as well, in order to make it more supportive of deep learning, more objective, and also to be perceived as more motivating by students. Coll et al. (2007) report that the use of continuous assessment rather than assessing students at the end of the semester can enhance the quality of student learning. If students are invited to demonstrate their learning progress in different situations, this typically leads to the employment of different learning strategies and helps to achieve learning outcomes (Scouller 1998). Therefore, instead of requiring students to write a single final exam, students would collect points during the entire semester. We introduced three multiple choice tests during the semester in order to motivate students to read the assigned literature continuously. Test questions were changed to assess higher order thinking, i.e. including the application, the analysis of hypothetical situations and the evaluation of possible solutions. For example, students read about a situation from the workplace and they were required to evaluate the appropriateness of the listed potential solutions and choose the most optimal one. Whenever possible, verbal feedback was provided alongside any grading.

Students received points also for their active participation in discussions during seminars where they often worked in teams on the assignments simulating issues taken from practice. Moreover, when students prepared two bigger group projects outside of class, they presented their progress at seminars and received verbal feedback both from their teachers and peers. Points assigned for group projects contributed towards student's final grades as well. Whenever possible, two teachers assessed student performance to limit any possible bias. Therefore, students had many opportunities to demonstrate their learning during the semester and if they underperformed in one component, they could compensate it through other assessment tasks.

Data collection

Despite the team effort in innovating the course, I was solely responsible for evaluating the outcomes of the innovation. I decided to use three data collection methods. Firstly, I observed and reflected on student learning in one lecture and two seminars. I focused on students' active participation and classified their oral contributions to seminars into two categories: (1) relevant argumentation that is supported by the literature, and (2) the effort to communicate their own opinions. I evaluated student contribution on a 0-3 scale in each category, and then combined these two scales into a cumulative measure of the quality of student contributions.

Secondly and following Moore (2009), I designed an anonymous student feedback questionnaire as depicted in table 1. The survey was administered at the beginning of the last seminar when students already knew their grades and thus could express not only positive but also negative ideas without the fear of being punished. Thirdly, I considered the marks students received for the course.

Table 1. Anonymous feedback questionnaire answered by students

1. The most useful thing/skill I learned during this course was...
2. The thing that made learning most effective for me was...
3. The thing I struggled the most with was...
4. What I need to stop doing, which hinders my learning, is...
5. What I can start to do that will help me to learn more effectively, is....
6. What I would like the teacher to stop doing, because it hinders my learning, is...
7. What I would like the teacher to continue doing, because it helps my learning, is...
8. I wish to work as a personnel psychologist one day (yes, maybe, or no)

Findings

My observations led to mixed results. Some of the expected positive effects of the applied innovation were confirmed. Firstly, the expectation that students will show interest in the course was confirmed and it was apparent that students' attendance of lectures increased. Since the attendance in lectures was not obligatory, I supposed students came because they perceived the lectures to be meaningful to them. Secondly, seminars became more interactive and most students participated actively – they started to talk more often, their answers were mostly correct, and they communicated not only with the teacher (as before) but also among themselves. After some initial difficulties, students gained the confidence to ask questions and express their opinions even if these would be contradictory to the opinions of others. Thirdly, I could observe a bigger interest in the subject itself. During seminars where students presented their progress on group projects, they were curious about how other groups had solved the fictional case studies and asked questions to learn more.

Second, during the two seminars where I observed and assessed students' participation in a group discussion when they were asked to solve a chosen hypothetical situation, I found some evidence for student engagement taking place at a relatively high order of thinking. Thirty-two per cent of students demonstrated higher-level thinking as in accordance with Bloom's taxonomy, i.e. an ability to analyse, evaluate and create arguments based on the knowledge acquired in this course. Out of these students, ten per cent discussed the problem on a professional level (evaluated by five or six points) and twenty-two per cent presented valid arguments supported by the literature (three or four points). However, thirty-eight per cent expressed their opinions actively but without arguments supported by the literature (one or two points), not demonstrating their understanding of the studied concepts, and another thirty per cent of students – those scored zero on both scales – remained passive and did not contribute to the solution.

While the performance of the upper first third of the class is in line with my expectations, the performance of the other two thirds of students requires some reflecting. The fact that not all students could participate actively in a group discussion at the same time must be taken into consideration when interpreting the results. I supposed that even more students were able to analyse, evaluate, and create an argument based on the knowledge acquired in this course, but some of them did not demonstrate higher-level thinking in the discussion (they could be too shy, etc.). In addition, these results are only based on two seminars.

More evidence of students' higher-level thinking skills arrived in the guise of the results of the continuous assessment during which students had to apply their knowledge in a hypothetical situation and presented a solution to a complex realistic scenario (e.g. recruiting a new employee to a particular organization). An analysis of their final marks showed that fifty per cent of students received an A or B in the course, that is, accumulated more than eighty per cent of the possible number of points. The rest of the students received a C (38 per cent) or a D (12 per cent), none of the students failed. This can be understood as an indication of students' motivation and quality of learning.

Feedback from students lent support to the expectation about the improved quality of their learning regarding work place skills. Feedback questionnaires were completed by forty out of sixty students who were present during the last seminar (the response rate was 66.7 per cent). Thirteen students (33 per cent) identified critical thinking as the most useful competence developed during this course. For example, a student remarked that 'The most useful thing I have learned during this course is a way of thinking about job content and the essential criteria needed for its performance, a comprehensive reflection on this issue'. Secondly, five students (12.5 per cent) appreciated that they had improved their team work skills as one student put it very aptly: 'I am used to working on my own, and even when working in a group, I do my part separately. This time we worked really well together – brainstorming etc., the work was more fun, and I believe we achieved better results. It took more time than individual work, but I believe it was worth it'. Thirdly, four students (10 per cent) reported an increased ability to discuss their points of view, as for example: 'I feel I improved my skills in expressing myself, the ability to defend my opinions, the ability to respond to others' comments, listen to them, and discuss with them'. Lastly, some students also listed enhancement of subject knowledge among the main course outcomes – how to conduct a job analysis, select a new employee, measure employees' performance on the job, etc.

Although the above quotations already hinted at it, there is a further signal that the improvement of their skills can be directly linked to the activities introduced by this innovation. Some students explicitly reported that they particularly valued the seminar that focused on different approaches to learning in the workplace and where students learned by doing. Case studies were the learning activity that students appreciated the most: altogether twenty-one students (52.5

per cent) named this activity to be the most beneficial to their learning. Students greatly valued practical examples because they made theories easier for them to understand and remember, as expressed by this quote: 'My learning was effective because most of the theory was immediately tested in practice'. Students claimed to be often motivated to study something in advance so that they could participate actively in class. Most of them said they attended lectures even though attendance was not obligatory, as one of them described: 'My learning was effective because I read assigned literature before lectures and then really participated in class'.

Group projects where students applied knowledge to real workplace situations were valued by twenty-four students (60 per cent). Students felt motivated by the opportunity to cooperate with peers and learn from them, present progress of their learning on seminars, discuss the encountered difficulties and receive feedback from teachers in a friendly atmosphere, as exemplified by these words: 'The best thing were the group projects presented on seminars – to see the work and hear the opinions and practices of classmates, and get feedback from teachers'.

Moreover, students showed appreciation for the benefits of the other aspects of the innovation: eight of them (20 per cent) said that the assigned literature was well chosen and the volume of the readings was not overwhelming. Even though an appreciation for the increased number of assessment activities was not generally shared, one student noted how helpful it was: 'My learning was effective thanks to the continuous tests covering smaller units of the curriculum'. Finally, students perceived the aims of the course as being formulated clearly and they felt the course was meaningful and interesting.

To conclude, regarding their perception of personnel psychology as a career choice, at the beginning of the course, and in line with our observations from earlier courses, students were not particularly interested in becoming personnel psychologists: during the first class only a few of them expressed their interest in becoming a personnel psychologist when responding to my colleague's direct inquiry. Yet, at the end of the course, a majority of students stated that they want (27.5 per cent) or maybe want (30 per cent) to work in this field and some of them explicitly said that their attitude had been changed by this course.

Conclusion

This chapter reported on the innovation that aimed to increase student motivation and to help students achieve higher-order learning outcomes (Krathwohl 2002). In the context of departmental teaching, this innovation provided a new approach centred on student learning. Its novelty was that students presented the ongoing results of their work and reworked their assignments based on feedback from their teachers and peers alike. There was an increased emphasis on the applicability of the results of students' work. Therefore, students developed competences in line with the current demands of the labour market, such as the ability to present the results in a concise, understandable and interesting way.

Specifically, my colleagues redesigned the course following the logic of constructive alignment, changed its content to be more appealing and students were invited to participate more actively both in and outside of the classroom. Students' feedback suggested that the innovation largely met its goals. Students appreciated the opportunity to develop their capacity of critical thinking, work in teams and apply their knowledge about personnel psychology to real-life scenarios. Moreover, they valued the continuous assessment aspect, which, as students reported, motivated them to study the assigned literature continuously. Furthermore, they found the content of the course appealing and there has been a significant increase in the number of students interested in working in this area of psychology at the end of the semester as compared to the first seminar. My observations evidenced an increase attendance of the lectures, improved student engagement in seminars, and the development of student higher-order thinking in line with course aims, although this became fully evident only for about one third of the students.

Despite of the innovation, there were still students who lacked motivation to study and remained passive – which they specified as the aspect that they struggled with the most. Some students complained about the assessment being too heavy. To reduce possible stress resulting from the increased assessment, it is recommendable to frame opportunities to earn bonus points positively and to make sure students do not feel penalized. Additionally, students reported they had difficulties to fully familiarize themselves with the course requirements, because the syllabus included many different activities. Therefore, it is advisable to provide a clearer, more structured and straightforward syllabus.

Further improvements could cover e.g. technology enhanced learning, offering students an opportunity for self-assessment, or the possibility to listen to the lecture once more at their own pace and convenience. Another form of improvement would be to apply just-in time teaching, where quizzes shortly before class would provide information about problematic issues. Last but not least, there is a possibility to apply feedback in the guise of the muddiest point or minute paper as proposed by Angelo and Cross (1993). Notwithstanding the need for further improvements, the innovation was successful and can serve as a starting point when redesigning another course – whether it be at our university or elsewhere.

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